

## Buying a laptop? What you need to know

Based on a July 12, 2012 Sydney Morning Herald article by Sam Grobart.

### *When you're looking for a laptop, it's easy to be overwhelmed by a bunch of features you won't need.*

If you're looking to buy a laptop, there is no shortage of websites to help you choose one. The results of a simple Google search, most likely, will tell you to keep track of these things: the processor's speed, the amount of memory, the brand and the model of graphics card. But for most of us, worrying about such features is a waste of time (with one exception).

If you need a laptop that will let you render 3-D graphics while also managing an air traffic control system, stop reading as you are a real serious computer user. You can continue to buy laptops the old-fashioned way.

For those of you who are still reading (ie only have ordinary needs), there are a few features that you should worry about that are unlikely to have come up in your search. You want a portable computer to get you online, and to allow you to watch some movies, answer some emails and work on a document, photos, music, spread sheet or PowerPoint presentation.

So here's a guide to help you figure out what's worth paying attention to, and what you can skip.

**Weight:** Anything more than 2.5kg is a pain in the shoulder. Any number of laptops weigh far less than that (down to around 1kg), so there's no reason to get anything heavier.

**Screen size:** The smallest displays are about 25cm (10"), measured diagonally. This is too small. The next step up is around 29cm (11.4"), which is great for a second laptop that you can take traveling. But for most of us, 33cm (13") is the sweet spot — big enough but still portable enough to be thrown in a bag. Laptops with 38cm (15") displays are just a bit too big for constant lugging around but fine for occasional travel. 43 and 46cm models are awkwardly huge, weigh around 3.5kg or more, and are really desktop replacement machines. — lovely to use, but painful to lug any distance or on an aircraft

**Processor:** Doesn't matter. Seriously. Does the laptop you're looking at have a 2nd Generation Intel Core i3-2377M Processor running at 1.4GHz with a 3MB L3 cache? That's wonderful. Oh wait, it doesn't? Still wonderful. For regular people, all processors are fine. Don't get bogged down in the details — and don't pay more for some optional chip that offers an incremental speed boost. For what you need a laptop to do, it's fine as is.

**Battery life:** Take a look at this fine print about battery-life specs from Best Buy's website: "Battery life will vary depending on the product configuration, product model, applications loaded on the product, power management setting of the product, and product features used by the customer." In other words, battery-life specs mean little. Have a power cord with you.

**Memory:** Unlike the processor, RAM (random access memory) does matter. You want 4 gigabytes of RAM. A laptop with less than that will seem sluggish, with annoying delays between the time you click on a menu command or hit a key and something actually happens. If a manufacturer tries to sneak beneath a certain price with a model that comes with under 4GB, but you can upgrade for a couple of hundred bucks, you should upgrade.

Do you need more than 4GB? Let me ask you this: Are you a video editor? Do you like to leave more than a dozen applications open at once? If your answer is "no", you don't.

**Storage:** This used to matter a lot, but with the rise of streaming services and cloud computing, the amount of storage on your computer has become a little less important. Music can be streamed from Spotify and other services. Documents and other files can live on Google Docs. Photos can be uploaded to iCloud or Flickr.

**Graphics card:** See "Processor". For regular use, any graphics processor is going to do the trick.

**Wireless:** Some laptops are Wi-Fi only, but some have built-in chips so the laptop can get on 3G or 4G networks. Get the Wi-Fi-only model. If you need a cellular data connection, you can either wirelessly tether your laptop to your smartphone and use its signal, or you can get a MiFi, a separate device that will share a data signal with multiple devices at the same time.

**Optical drive:** This is that slot or tray you have been using for DVDs or recordable CDs, and it is falling by the wayside. Music has gone largely digital, forgoing physical media. Video seems next. Applications are increasingly downloaded from online stores. So you don't need the optical drive.

Might there be a time when you do need one? Perhaps, but it'll probably be so infrequent that you'd be better off getting a thinner, lighter laptop without an optical drive and then getting an external drive for those rare occasions when you need it. Laptops have better performance and longer battery life if they don't have to spin a mirrored disk around and shoot a laser at it.

**Price:** Spending \$500 or so will get you a perfectly fine laptop. Spend twice that or more, and you get into fancier machines that are notably slimmer and lighter. Many of these are called ultrabooks, and they have some things in common.

They are very slim and lightweight, and provide generally good battery life. One of the ways they accomplish these things is by using so-called flash storage (another way is by forgoing the aforementioned optical drive). With flash storage, files are stored on a chip, as opposed to a traditional spinning hard disk. Flash storage, also called solid-state storage, is lighter, faster and consumes less energy. It's also more expensive and has less capacity than some hard disks. But most flash drives still exceed 300 gigabytes, which is enough for most people.

**Mac or PC:** It's an age-old question, but it's less important now. Most things we do these days are web-based, so whether you're in an Apple operating system or not isn't the main factor. It used to be that Macs cost more than competing Windows machines, but that gap has shrunk. In the ultrabook category, Macs can be the least expensive, so don't rule anything out.

**Try it out:** Before buying any laptop, you must get it into your hands. All the specs in the world won't tell you if the keyboard's too cramped, the screen is not to your liking or the speakers are tinny. To figure that out, you need to go to a brick-and-mortar store. I'm not saying you have to buy a laptop at a brick-and-mortar store (sorry, brick-and-mortar stores), as lower prices may be found online. But you do need to kick the tyres before handing over your cash.

**Extras:** You don't have to buy these straight away but you might try to get some included in any deal, or offered at a discounted price.

- Common extras are a mouse and a laptop bag. Cordless mice are nice but a simple corded one is cheaper and more reliable. A bag is not essential and can often be picked up at Op-Shops.
- Don't get sucked into buying extra antivirus protection. Most laptops come with a 3 month trial that then requires serious money. There are plenty of good quality ones freely available.
- Another extra to consider is Microsoft Office. Most laptops come with a trial version which quickly becomes inoperable. If you must have it then the Home and Student version will more than satisfy most users. If the budget is tight then there are free alternatives available.
- Extra warranty is questionable. All laptops come with at least 12 months manufacturer's warranty. Reliability of computers is very high these days and most problems are caused by users.
- A portable hard drive for backing up your precious photos and documents can always be purchased later.